

# The Legends of

# HICKORY NUT GORGE

By Robert L. Williams

**When** the first inhabitants of Hickory Nut Gorge arrived centuries ago, they found a virtual paradise: beautiful mountains, wildflowers, magnificent trees, an amazing variety of animal life, streams and rivers teeming with aquatic life, and a nearly perfect climate. Today visitors can find that beauty and fascination intact. What's more, they can enjoy terrific meals, great overnight accommodations, and outdoor recreation from hiking to fishing, boating, sightseeing, photography, and river-walking along the Rocky Broad River.

The early settlers found gold, tso-lungh (a magical, legendary tobacco), legends of talking animals, the mysterious "Little People" who lived among the craggy peaks of the gorge, and an awesome mountain from which came ominous and sometimes terrifying sounds.

In time, small towns like Bat Cave, Gerton, Chimney Rock, and Lake Lure appeared, and stagecoach runs from Charlotte to Asheville became common. Historic inns like the Esmeralda Inn, the Sherrill Inn, and the Logan House sprang up along the narrow, bumpy and rutted roads.

## GORGE GROWS POPULAR FOR MOVIE-MAKING

Shortly afterwards, the world found Hickory Nut Gorge. Presidents, authors, movie celebrities, and political figures discovered that Hickory Nut Gorge was the perfect spot to vacation or settle down. Famed movie director Thomas Ince, friend of Charlie Chaplin and William Randolph Hearst, shot movies there. Soon moguls like John Ford, D.W. Griffith, Mack Sennett,

Cecil B. DeMille, Mary Pickford, and William S. Hart came to Hickory Nut Gorge.

Between 1915 and 1920, more than 75 movies were filmed in Hickory Nut Gorge. Bob Cummings, star of the hit television comedy series in the 1950s, "Love That Bob," appeared in 1915 as a villain in a silent movie called, "Heart of the Blue Ridge." In the movie, Cummings, who, like Dick Clark, never seemed to grow old, dies in a fall from one of the cliffs in the gorge.

Hollywood still finds the gorge to be the perfect setting for films, and stars like Clark Gable, Kathleen Turner, Patrick Swayze, Daniel Day-Lewis, Jennifer Grey, Claude Akins, Drew Barrymore,



*Chimney Rock Park attracts visitors from all over the nation and from many foreign countries. From the chimney, there is a breath-taking view of Lake Lure and portions of Hickory Nut Gorge.*



*The new Esmeralda Inn, located in the western part of Hickory Nut, is one of the oldest stopovers in western North Carolina. It has been featured in numerous movies and provided lodging for many movie stars.*

Madeline Stowe, and Gloria Swanson lived briefly in the Lake Lure-Chimney Rock area while filming such movies as "Dirty Dancing," "Last of the Mohicans," "My Fellow Americans," "A Breed Apart," and "FireStarter."

## OTHER CELEBRITIES DRAWN TO AREA'S NATURAL BEAUTY

Other celebrities such as famed Jazz Age novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald, etiquette expert Emily Post, President Calvin Coolidge, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, famed philosopher Robert

Ingersoll, Civil War General Lew Wallace (author of “Ben-Hur”), and novelist Frances Burnett found Hickory Nut Gorge ideal for their visits. Modern novelists like Phyllis Whitney lived in Hickory Nut Gorge while she researched her novel “Star Flight” which features many notable landmarks of Hickory Nut Gorge.

Lew Wallace often engaged (and enraged) Robert Ingersoll in earnest debates concerning religion. Ingersoll, a noted atheist, attempted to refute Wallace’s Christian thinking. After an evening meal at the Esmeralda Inn, the two would stand or sit in front of the inn’s huge fireplace and debate, to the amusement and delight of guests there.

Frances Burnett, a native of England, was a guest at the Logan House where, according to the local stories, she was inspired by the beauty and serenity of Hickory Nut Gorge. It was there that she wrote several stories, including the short story “Esmeralda,” which later became a long-running Broadway show.

**FROM MURDER TO LOST GOLD:  
LEGENDS OF THE GORGE**

The mystery of Rumbling Bald Mountain began (during modern history) in 1874 as tremors rattled dishes and broke windows. Dust, smoke and eerie sounds emanated from the rugged peak as shocks dislodged boulders inside the mountain and opened massive fissures. Residents were terrified, and even the National Speleological Society sent scientists from Washington, D.C., to investigate.

One legendary explanation for the smoke pouring from the mountain involved a mountain man and his son who fought bitterly while traveling, and never returned home. Years later, on his deathbed, the son admitted that he had killed his father, concealed the body in a mountain fissure, and burned a huge pile of brush to destroy evidence of the murder.

The mysterious Little People were part of the drama of tso-lungh, the magical tobacco plant with curative powers. According to the Cherokee legend, Dagul-Ku, the Goose, stole the sacred tobacco plant and took it to the land of Hng, where the Little People lived.

When the Cherokees tried to regain the tobacco, the Little People hurled huge rocks down upon the warriors. Then an old man magically turned himself into a giant hummingbird whose

wings dislodged enormous boulders and created a giant tornado, which swept away all of the evil spirits in Hickory Nut Gorge. Today, some people insist that when the weather is just right,

you can still see the Little People on the high cliffs of Hickory Nut Gorge.

Another story centers around a celestial battle on July 31, 1806. Mrs. Patsy Reaves reported that she and her two children had seen “a very numerous crowd of beings” atop Chimney Rock. Five years later, a husband and wife reported seeing two armies of horsemen high above the cliffs. The heavenly combatants, armed with swords, rode winged horses and slashed at each other in deadly combat. On at least three other occasions, residents reported similar sights. Many thought the

end of the world was at hand.

A more earthly legend insists that in the early 1700s, a group of Englishmen owned a gold mine on or near Round Top Mountain. The men prepared to ship their gold to Charleston, but Native Americans killed all but one of the Englishmen. The sole survivor, blinded in the attack, made his way back to England, where he attempted to draw a crude map to the mine. But to date, no one had found the lost gold mine.

**VISITING THE GORGE TODAY**

The visitor to Hickory Nut Gorge will discover majesty and beauty at Chimney Rock Park; Lake Lure, one of the most beautiful lakes in the nation; and shops in Bat Cave, Lake Lure, and Chimney Rock Village. The village is the home of Bubba’s General Store, one of the great shops in the gorge. It is also the only shop “managed” by a beautiful golden retriever (named Bubba, of course). The John Bull Trading Company is also one of the best shops in the mountains, and next door you’ll find Gale’s Chimney Rock Shop. The shop is run by one of the most colorful

characters in Western North Carolina, Steve Gale.

A Touch in Time in Bat Cave is a superb shop filled with delights. Just west of Bat Cave on US 74, you can find the Manual Woodworkers and Weavers outlet, a fascinating place to shop. In addition, enjoy waterfalls, great restaurants like the Cajun Pig, and the amazing bottomless pools on the east end of the gorge.



*The Bottomless Pools attraction is a favorite destination for thousands of tourists to Hickory Nut Gorge. These incredibly deep pools, included in Ripley’s Believe It or Not newspaper-syndicated feature, were formed naturally.*

**For More Information**

**Chamber of Commerce**  
www.thehickorynutgorge.com

**Chimney Rock Park**  
www.chimneyrockpark.com  
1-800-277-9611

**Lake Lure Tours**  
www.lakelure.com  
(877) 386-4255 or (828) 625-1373

**Chimney Rock Village**  
www.chimneyrock.org

**Esmeralda Inn**  
www.esmeraldainn.com  
(828) 625-9105

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